

Residents weigh in with county delegation

By Kate Magill kmagill@baltsun.com

Members of Howard County's state delegation listened as residents gave their input Nov. 29 on the 23 local bills they have proposed for the upcoming 2018 General Assembly legislative session.

The bills include a variety of issues, ranging from the creation of grants for local projects like an Ellicott City Public Arts Project to raising the Howard County sheriff's salary from \$94,000 to \$145,000 in 2019 and establishing a student loan assistance program for county teachers.

A number of community members weighed in on proposed legislation to increase developers' facilities surcharge for building on land in areas where schools are over-enrolled.

As proposed, the bill would double developers' fees in areas of the county where schools are enrolled between 110 and 115 percent of their utilization, and increase the fees by 200 percent in areas where schools are enrolled between 115 and 120 percent.

The bill is the state's reach into the locally contentious issue of the adequate public facility ordinance legislation, or APFO, which aims to ensure the county's schools and roads keep pace with development. Council members voted to pass an update of APFO on Nov. 6, only to discover that their bill had already expired by the time they voted; the legislation must now be reintroduced to the council in January.

At the hearing, county parents donned their familiar yellow T-shirts to show their opposition to what they say is weak APFO legislation that allows too much development, and testified against allowing developers to build in crowded areas.

“The community fought very hard. This yellow shirt represents thousands of people,” Karina Fisher said. “Those double and triple fees should be the baseline for what we’re charging for school fees.”

If the county’s APFO bill is passed as it was amended in November, the law would set elementary schools at a capacity of 105 percent, middle schools at 110 percent and high schools at 115 percent.

State delegates had a number of questions about the intricacies of the complex APFO legislation, and expressed their desire to learn more at their upcoming work session. Del. Robert Flanagan asked for more information about how the county would be impacted if the state did not pass the bill and the fees remained unchanged.

“Have you done an analysis of the revenue stream we’re going to see or not see as a result of APFO if we don’t pass this bill?” he asked county representatives who attended the hearing.

Council members **Jon Weinstein**, Calvin Ball and Jen Terrasa each testified in support of several pieces of legislation.

All three offered their support for a state bill to allow elderly residents to receive a property tax credit if they have lived in Howard County for at least 40 years. The current tax credit requires individuals to have lived in the same residence for that time period; Weinstein testified that the new legislation would allow individuals to downsize and still receive the credit.

Terrasa commented on state legislation that would allow sharing of data between the school system and the county’s health department. The councilwoman expressed concern about ensuring student privacy when collecting health data, as well as maintaining student privacy as that data is being shared.

Board of Education student member Anna Selbrede expressed similar privacy concerns, stating that the board opposed the bill.

Meanwhile, the county’s health officer, Maura Rossman, emphasized the importance of sharing de-identified data to improve student health, which she said is allowed under federal law, as the data cannot be linked back to any specific individual.

“Student achievement and wellness are inextricably linked,” Rossman said. “In an era of data-driven decision-making and accountability, the ability of public health officials to access relevant health data from our schools and education agencies is of the utmost importance in ensuring the health of our community and especially children.”

The General Assembly’s legislative session in Annapolis begins on Jan. 10, 2018. Howard’s delegation will also hold a public hearing in early 2018 to hear testimony on statewide issues; no date for that meeting has been announced.